# States of Colour: Irish and Vietnamese Women after Albert Kahn's Archives of the Planet - Etudes Irlandaises (French Journal of Irish Studies) | Summer 2021 Issue | Fine-Combing The Past: Frames, Patterns and Metaphors

# *States of Colour:* Irish and Vietnamese Women after Albert Kahn's Archives of the Planet.

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## Biographical note.

Ailbhe Greaney was born in Galway Ireland and lives and works in Belfast. She is one of the founding members of the BA(Hons) Photography & Video Degree (2007) and MFA Photography Degree (Campus 2010/ E-Learning 2015) at Ulster University's Belfast School of Art. She was the MFA Photography Course Director from 2013-2017 and appointed the inaugural Fulbright Ireland Ambassador for Ulster University in 2016. A BA(Hons) Communications Graduate from Dublin City University, Ailbhe also holds an MFA with Distinction from the School of Visual Arts New York, where she graduated as a Fulbright and Aaron Siskind Memorial Scholar, under the mentorship of Sarah Charlesworth, Anna Gaskell, Collier Schorr, Stephen Shore, Charles Traub and Randy West. She is the recipient of the SVA MFA Chairman's Award 2000-2003, Arts Council Visual Arts Bursary 2006, Arts Council Travel Award 2012, Centre Culturel Irlandais Paris Residency Award 2014 and SPE International Conference Grant Award 2017. Her work has been exhibited and published both nationally and internationally, most recently in The Netherlands, Italy, Belfast, Liverpool, London, New York and Paris. This practice, writing and research has been contextualized within institutions such as The Society for Photographic Education, The Aperture Foundation New York (as part of *Photography Is Magic* curated by Charlotte Cotton), The Tate Modern, The Tate Liverpool and The CCI Paris. The work *Through A Pane, H91X6XN – BT180AJ,* 2020, is currently traveling with the Golden Thread Gallery's international touring exhibition *Not Alone*, until 31 July 2021. *Notes On Distance,* photographs and writing, can be seen as part of the international photography festival *FORMAT21: Control,* from 12 March – 11 April 2021. Ailbhe will have a solo exhibition at the Golden Thread Gallery Belfast in 2022 and her work will feature as part of the Centre Culturel Irlandais 20 Year Anniversary Programme in Paris in 2022.

## Acknowledgements:

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Finally, to the subjects of my photographs, I am in awe of what you have revealed to me, for your patience, generous spirit, inspiration and gestures of collaboration.

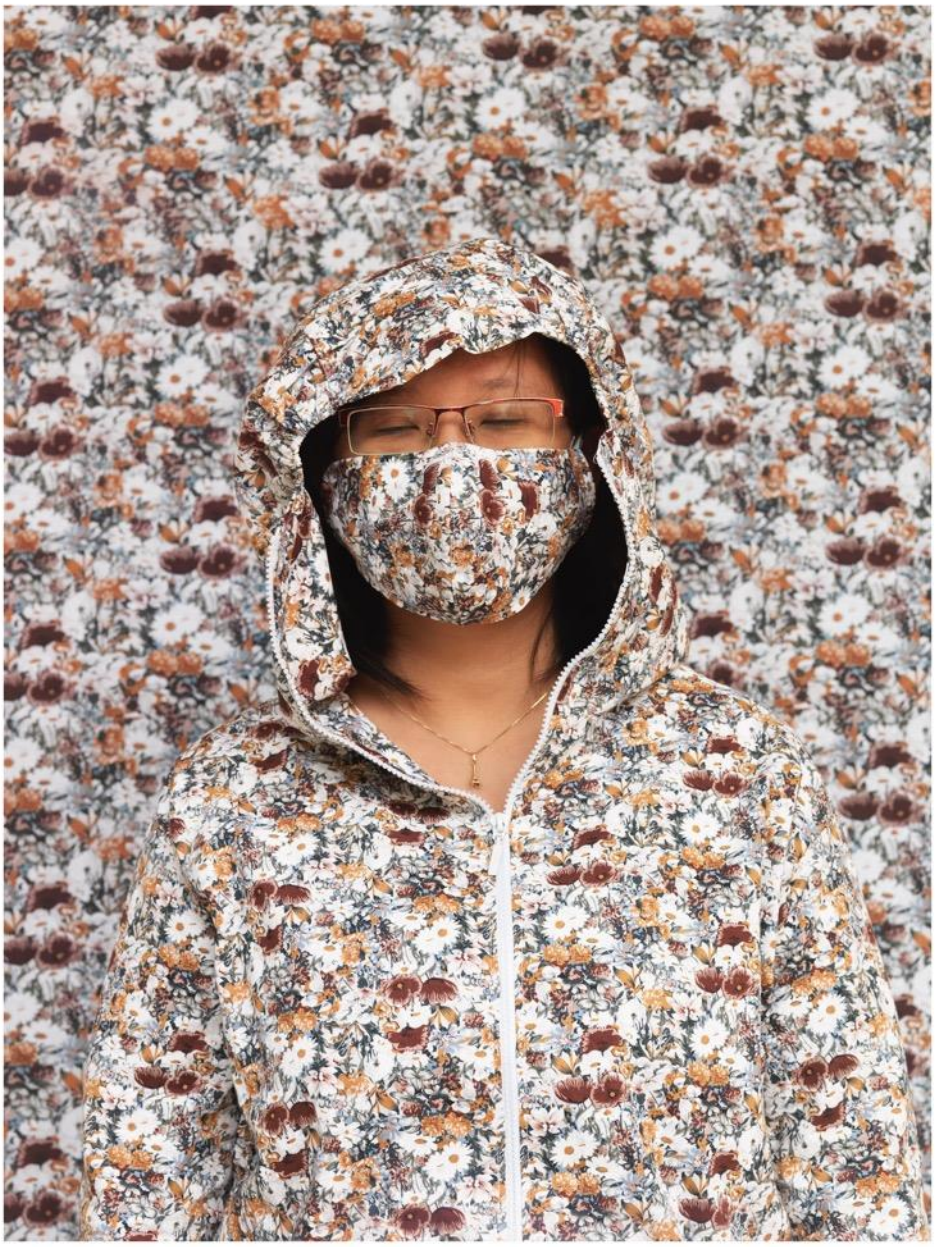

Figure 01: Nam, Paris, *Street Flower*, 2014. *Ailbhe Greaney*.

# *States of Colour:* Irish and Vietnamese Women after Albert Kahn's Archives of the Planet.


## Abstract:

On the eve of 100-year anniversary of the foundation of the Irish States, and to mark 55 years since the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975, this paper serves to explore the Albert Kahn Archive's representation of Irish and Vietnamese women between states, shrouded in the iconography of colour and dress. The author's own photographic practice of representation extends this narrative through the use of pattern and gesture; collaborating with women who offer us a purposefully occluded view onto the act and experience of living between 'States'.



## Key Words:

Photography; women, pattern, colour; dress; archive; Ireland; Vietnam; revolution; colonialism; post-colonialism;

**INTRODUCTION:**

In 1913 Marguerite Mespoulet and Madeleine Mignon-Alba visited Ireland to make the first colour photographs of Ireland and its people. These two photographers were the only female photographers to create images for French banker and philanthropist, Albert Kahn, as part of his worldwide project "Archives of the Planet." The objective of this archive was to photographically record, in over 72,000 colour images, the life of more than 50 countries at a time when this life was about to change drastically due to the forces of war and globalization. This technology, invented by the Lumière brothers, 'was the first viable photographic process to reproduce authentic colours, unmitigated by intervention or manipulation'[1]. Significantly, at a time when women's freedoms were limited, Kahn's archive represents the work of these two female French photographers in Ireland, as well as providing us with an image of women from the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa, between 1909 and the early 1930s[2]. Taken just a few years before the Easter Rising of 1916, and the subsequent foundation of the Irish state with independence from Britain, the images of Irish women introduce us to the complex and often contradictory role of women within Irish society at this time. 'For Irish nationalists Easter 1916 signalled the rebirth of the nation – a stepping-stone to Sinn Fein's landslide victory in the 1918 election, the war of independence against Britain from 1919 to 1921 and the creation of

1 Blackman, "Colouring the Claddagh: A Distorted View?", 213.

2 National Library of Ireland "In Search of Ireland 1913."
Cité Internationale Universitaire De Paris "Hanoï en Couleurs (1914-1917)".

To find relevant published images of Ireland and Vietnam from the Albert Kahn Archive, please see the following exhibitions from the National Library of Ireland and Cité Internationale Universitaire De Paris:
https://www.nli.ie/en/udlist/current-exhibitions.aspx?article=77367c9f-891d-45be-925e-4df63c7d1ee5
https://www.ciup.fr/accueil/hanoi-45186/
https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x26zw3d

the Irish Free State'[3]. Approximately 220 women took part in the rising. The Proclamation of the Republic, read out on Easter Monday 1916, reveals the movement's radical inclusion of women and its endorsement of equality for women.

Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba's colour images from the west of Ireland reveal the direct character of women within Irish society at this time. They provide a clue to the dynamism of the 1916 rising, which culminated in the unification of the struggles for national independence, women's equality and labour, and the cultural revival movement. The role of colour in these photographs reveals a vibrancy of character, a fierceness, which suggests the women's role in society, their independence as characters and not simply as pictorial elements within a landscape. This kind of focus, and identification of character, has been mostly absent within black and white photographic representations of *ordinary* women. Such black and white representations fail to depict the role of aesthetics in lifting the human spirit above poverty and oppression. Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba's images provide a platform from which to explore Ireland's historic relationship to culture as a revolutionary force.

In 1915 Leon Busy, a French officer serving in Indochina, created images of Vietnam and in particular the women of Vietnam for Kahn's Archive. In contrast to the images of Irish women taken by Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba, these images have been described by film historian Sam Rohdie in the following terms 'The best are very beautiful, the worst merely vulgar'[4]. There is a complex web of relationships to be explored here with the colonized female body at its centre. Where the images of Vietnam appear to be an attempt to appropriate the native and construct her image, the images

3 Reynolds, "As the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising approaches…."

4 Rohdie, Promised Lands, 64.

taken in Ireland seem to allow the photographed a hand in the construction of her own image.

Just as Irish women participated in the Irish Citizen Army, during the 20th century, North Vietnamese women were enlisted and fought in the combat zone for an independent Vietnam against the Japanese, the United States and South Vietnam[5]. This history does not exclude the fact, however, that Vietnamese women like Irish women; bound by traditional gender roles and subjects of historical religious, cultural and societal norms under the influence of the Catholic Church; exist within a society that continues to disadvantage them whilst advocating technical equality in terms of the political constitution. Despite the abundant documentation of the Vietnamese refugee experience, Vietnamese women refugees have traditionally remained silent[6]. Many factors have contributed to this, including the sublimation of individual identity, and in particular female identity, within a society that favours the collective.

In 2006, on the 90th anniversary of the 1916 rising, Caoilfhionn Ní Dhonnabháin raised the following issues in An Phoblacht in relation to women in contemporary Irish society:

> Women continue to experience higher levels of poverty, have significantly inferior pension coverage, continue to carry the burden of unpaid caring work, continue to earn less than their male colleagues and represent a mere 13.8% of the T.D.'s in Leinster House[7].

In the *Irish Independent Newspaper* (2013), Chrissie Russell reported that within the EU,

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5 Taylor, Vietnamese Women at War.

6 Nguyen, Memory Is Another Country.

7 Ní Dhonnabháin, "1916-2006; Women and the Easter Rising."

Ireland ranked 25th out of 27 countries for female political representation. Just 26 of Ireland's 166 elected representatives were at this time female. The introduction of gender quota legislation before the 2016 General Elections produced an increase of 6.5 percent, bringing the figure up from 15.7% to 22.2%. In 2019 this figure was 23.9%[8].

In 2021, and on the eve of the Irish State's 100-year anniversary, this paper explores the historic representation of Irish women between states, shrouded in the iconography of colour and dress: 'As more and more of the rural world gradually disappeared in the West, memory changed from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to rememoration'[9]. On the occasion of the 55th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, such images of Irish women are posited against photographic representations of Vietnamese women, existing within different states, at specific points during the same 100-year period.

8 Government of Ireland, "Female Representation in Politics in Ireland."

9 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 15.

Figure 02: Xuan Anh Nguyen Vu, Paris, *Street Flower*, 2014. *Ailbhe Greaney*.

Figure 03: Paris, *Street Flower*, 2014. *Ailbhe Greaney*.

Out of this emerges my own photographic investigation, in which I picture young Vietnamese women living in Paris in 2014/2015. As a female photographer, from Ireland, undertaking a three-month residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, 5, rue des Irlandais, Paris, these images take the position of an outsider looking in. The work entitled, *Street Flower*, has its origins within an exploration of the movement of people between Vietnam and Paris (and the surrounding Ile-de-France region) since 1954. During the residency, however, this exploration came to focus more closely on the movement of young Vietnamese women through the contemporary streets and gardens of Paris. As a female outsider photographing other female outsiders, the images emphasize this aspect of movement between places and are collaborative in nature. The images are a combination of my perspective as an Irish woman and that of the Vietnamese women living in Paris. As with the images from the Albert Kahn Archive, they use colour, dress and pattern, as a language to both integrate and dislocate; to potentially conceal more than to reveal, in alignment with identities that have - for reasons that are manifold - remained silent.

This paper seeks to position my collaborative approach as a female Irish photographer working with Vietnamese women in France in 2014/2015, alongside that of Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba, two female French photographers working with Irish women in Ireland, as it belonged to Great Britain, in 1913. In addition, this perspective will be contrasted with that of a French male photographer, photographing Vietnamese women in Vietnam, as it belonged to France, in 1914. As we enter the 100 Year anniversary of the foundation of both the Irish and Northern Irish States this work is brought up to date by chapters that form part of a larger body of work, of which *Street Flower* is the first. These additional chapter are *Wild Flowers,* beginning in Ireland in 2017, and *Wall Flower*, which has its roots in Gravesend in the United Kingdom, in 2020.

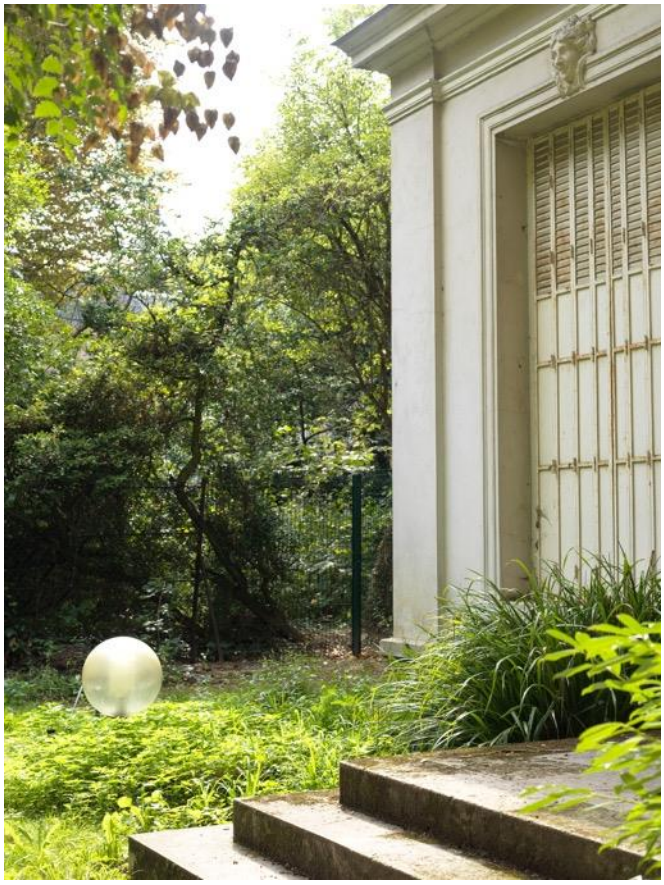

Figure 04: Musée Albert Kahn (MAK) Estate at rue du Port, Boulogne- Billancourt, Paris, 2015. *Ailbhe Greaney.*

***The Albert Kahn Archive.***

The history, any history, which represents the women of Ireland and Vietnam over the last one hundred years, is a contradictory one. The lives of women during this time hinge upon the lives of the women that preceded them. Very often the images of the Albert Kahn Archive tell us more about the women and men that came before, than the women and men that they were about to become.

Kahn's utopian goal was the 'preservation of peace and the furtherance of mutual

understanding'[10] between nations. He espoused the theory that to know each other better was to understand each other better. For Kahn it then followed that this knowledge and understanding would help to prevent us from waging war upon one another. He was intent upon capturing traditional ways of life before they were wiped out by modernization, in fact by globalization, before the term itself was even invented. In this way, not only was the archive interested in furthering understanding between nations, it was also directed towards furthering understanding between generations. 'To fix once and for all, the look and practices and mode of human activity whose fatal disappearances is just a question of time'[11]. A student and friend of Henri Bergson, Kahn's philanthropic activities later supported Bergson's involvement in establishing the United Nations[12].

The history of the Albert Kahn Archive itself is rife with contradictions. For indeed as Paula Amad has argued, the Archive failed in its utopian objectives because of its inaccessibility to the wider population. Kahn's films and autochromes were disseminated in a very controlled way, screened at his home, now the site of the Albert Kahn Museum, to his friends and to members of his Societe´ Autour du Monde, in the pursuit of inter-cultural cooperation and knowledge. As such the films and autochromes were made available to an elite, select, educated audience and would not in fact have been viewed by many of the people featured in the actual films and autochromes themselves. No doubt the effect of these films on such enlightened and scholarly minds was positive and served in turn to enlighten and educate their students towards a richer intercultural understanding between nations. This is noble, but also elitist, and in some

10 Kahn in Amad, *Counter-Archive,* 49.

11 Kahn in Amad, *Counter-Archive,* 49.

12 Hoorn and Creed, "Memory, History and Modernity," 758.

respects may be viewed as educating the educated and potentially only reinforcing existing ideas held within their liberal minds. The society convened for informal luncheons every Sunday, with guests including 'Albert Einstein, H.G.Wells, Edmund Husserl, Rudyard Kipling, Albert Thomas, Auguste Rodin, Léon Bourgeois, Marie Curie, André Michelin, Thomas Mann, Louis Lumière, and Colette'[13].

Conversely it may be argued that because these films were never made public to a fee-paying audience they were never digested as part of an over-riding culture, which sought to promote the positive nature of the French civilising mission as a modernizing force. In the same year that Louis Lumiere invented the portable motion picture camera, France established the mission civilisatrice as official governmental policy. A 1912 Official Document of the French Government states: '……..the geographical film … helps link the colonies to the mother country … and reminds us of the Frenchmen sacrificing themselves to an ideal … Cinema will be the best emigration agency of the future'[14]. Unlike these films, which were recognized by the government as a powerful ally in the representation and dissemination of the ideals and outcomes of the French civilizing mission, Kahn's films were never screened commercially and were never used in this way as a kind of public propaganda.

13 Amad, "Cinema's 'Sanctuary," 141.

14 Slavin, "Colonial Cinema and Imperial France," 59.

Figure 05: Nan O'Toole (1877-May 1959), Mian Kelly (née Mary O'Toole) (1897/98 - 1973), Powells Gable, The Claddagh, 1913. *Marguerite Mespoulet,* Archives de la Planète. Autochrome. Paris: Musée Albert Kahn.
Prints courtesy the private collection of Tommy Holohan, collage by *Ailbhe Greaney. (Colour images by Mespoulet, Black and White image of Nan O'Toole at her doorway from Byrne, Donn Ireland The Rock whence I was Hewn, all courtesy the collection of Tommy Holohan).*

Figure 06: Katie Holohan, Powells Gable, The Claddagh, 2015. *Ailbhe Greaney. (Katie Holohan: Great-Great-Grand-daughter Michael and Nan O'Toole and Great-Great-Grand-niece of Mian Kelly).*

### *Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba in Ireland.*

Interestingly, in the context of his mission, Albert Kahn himself was a shy, reclusive individual. Only one professional photograph can be found of him. There is a certain air of mystery around the man himself, which attaches itself to some of his "Autours du Monde". Maguerite Mespoulet the main author of the Photographs from Ireland, with Mignon serving as her assistant, has been difficult to locate. Biographical information on Mespoulet is held within the archives of Wesseley College, Barnard College and Columbia University in the United States. These institutions hold records of her academic and professional life as a teacher, but hold little reference to her time as a photographer in Ireland.

Most of the articles published in the Irish press between 1913 and 1981 refer to the photographers as *Messieurs* Mespoulet and Mignon. The general assumption of *The Irish Times, The Irish Press* and *The Connacht Sentinel* was that the photographers were men. It might be assumed that traveling through Ireland in 1913 with a large format

Autochrome camera, these two Parisian women would have made quite a striking pair. It seems that the opposite was in fact true. Their presence seems unremarkable and unremarked upon. Their photographic journey appears to have been unobtrusive in nature. This may go some way towards explaining the quiet connection that they made with the private and guarded women of the west of Ireland.

Born in Paris on the 2nd of December 1880, Marguerite Mespoulet was 33 when she travelled to Ireland in May of 1913. Ireland at this time would have been a place of great political, social and cultural unrest. Raidio Teilifis Eireann's *The Century Ireland* project, an online historical newspaper providing some insight into life in Ireland in 1913, tells us that April 1913 saw the Abbey Theatre stage a one-act drama by George Fitzmaurace. In the play the character Jaymony Shanahan describes his experience of life in rural Kerry as, 'The same old thing every day - this is an ugly spot, and the people ignorant, grumpy and savage'[14]. A closer look at the events of 1913 alone reveals a society that Dr. Will Murphy describes as populated by, 'people animated by contested ideas and ambitions, changing economic and social conditions, vibrant popular cultures, and an increasingly polarised politics'[15].

On the 8th of September 1913, The Irish Times, published the poem *September 1913* by W.B Yeats. This was in response to Dublin Corporation's failure to build a dedicated gallery for modern art, to house the collection of Sir Hugh Lane, art collector and nephew of Lady Gregory. It has often been assumed that impetus for the poem was the Dublin Lockout, in fact it was in response to the loss of Lane's collection of modern art to the city of Dublin, which included works by Manet, Degas, Monet, Renoir, Corot

14 Murphy, "Ireland in May 1913."

15 Murphy, "Ireland in May 1913."

and Irish painters, Roderic O'Conor, Nathaniel Hone, Walter Osborne, William Orpen, John Lavery and John B. Yeats. As Luke Gibbons has noted 'Lane's death in the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 brought a premature end to the possibility of Dublin acting as an outpost for modern art in early twentieth century Europe'[16]. In his essay Visual Modernisms, Gibbons, quoting Marianne Hartigan, notes that 'it was women who were the catalysts for the introduction of modernism into Irish art.' A female artist 'did not have to bow to academia to make a living as a painter, but could afford to experiment and explore new methods'[17]. Evie Hone and Mainie Jellet were two well off Irish Protestant female painters, who studied in London and Paris, and were influenced by Henri Bergson's theory of the "flow" of experience, as well as Cubism, Celticism and Catholic medievalism, resulting in the development of a distinctive Irish Cubism. In fact, this period in Irish history saw women from all walks of life push Ireland forward toward a state of Modernism. This period saw women campaign for both the freedom of women and Ireland as a nation. Their involvement in movements from Cumann na mBan, to the Irish Literary Revival, reveal the overlapping agendas that unite cultural, social and political revolution. Such women reflect a society with women revolutionaries at its core.

The strength of women as they fought for independence only highlights the contradictions inherent within the narrative of Irish women's lives, however. As Maria Luddy makes clear, 'The War of Independence, the creation of the Northern Irish state, the signing of the Treaty and the ensuing civil war created new Irelands, in which women found themselves operating in a different political climate, a climate which remained

16 Gibbons, "Visual Modernisms," 129.

17 Hartigan in Gibbons, "Visual Modernisms," 129.

fundamentally hostile to them in their fight for recognition of their rights.[18]' Nora Tynan O'Mahony, Poet and Novelist, writing in the Catholic magazine *The Irish Monthly* in 1913, expressed the following in relation to *The Mother*: 'More and more, in these degenerate days of militant suffragettism and similar foolishness if not actually wickedness, does the danger grow that the old-time honour and reference due to and hithero accorded to motherhood may become a thing of the past.[19]' In 2015 *The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes by the Irish Government* was established. The 12th of January 2021 saw the publication of a 'full account of what happened to vulnerable women and children in Mother and Baby Homes during the period 1922 to 1998[20]'; a history which begins with the foundation of the Irish states and culminates within a period of living memory. The commission was originally set up because of the exhaustive work of local amateur historian, Catherine Corless, which brought international attention to the remains of 800 babies and children within an unmarked mass grave at a home run by nuns in Tuam, County Galway. Her campaign has raised the importance of knowing, representing and understanding our own local history. Within such a context it is my opinion that Mespoulet's representations of Irish women from the west of Ireland provide a visual for the kind of quiet strength inherent within Irish women living during such a time of repression, transition, political and social upheaval.

Mespoulet came to Ireland from France, a country with no political association or agenda with regard to Ireland. That is not to say however that France as a nation did not

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18 Luddy, Women in Ireland, 1800-1918, xxvii.

19 Luddy, Women in Ireland, 1800-1918, 17.

20 Government of Ireland, "Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes."

hold certain preconceived notions about the country. Whilst relations between France and Britain were good in the 19th Century a certain rivalry still existed. Therefore, a French romantic notion of the noble Irish savage, living at the edge of Europe, prevailed in the public consciousness, with Britain as the villain. French travel writers set the scene for French interpretations of Irish life. The landscapes conjured up by one travel writer, Jean-Joseph Prevost, in *Un Tour en Irlande,* are those promoted by the Romantic movement which swept Europe at the time: 'wild nature, tumultuous cloud formations, cascading streams, lofty cliffs and ruins, ruins and still more ruins.[21]' Painters from both within and outside Ireland were also contributing to this narrative, descending as they were, particularly on the west of Ireland, to capture a declining culture; in similar fashion to the recording of the ancient Breton culture in France. In an Irish context this was to "'immerse themselves in an unspoiled landscape inhabited by people who spoke Irish, wore their own style of clothing and lived off the land and the sea.[22]'

> 'This melancholy country expresses itself mainly through its graveyards where ruins collapse over graves; where nettles and weeds grow between close graves, those of the 6th century and those of the present century; where death has no companion but the changing sky and the running wind; yet where great softness prevails'
>
> 'Ce pays de mélancolie parle surtout dans ses cimetières où des ruines s'écroulent sur des tombes, où entre les tombes serrées, celles du Vie sièce et celles de notre siècle, poussentr drues les orties et les mauvaises herbess, où la mort n'a de

21 Prévost in Grace Neville, "Towards an analyses of the writings of J.-J. Prévost."

22 Bourke, West of Ireland Paintings at the National Gallery of Ireland from 1800 to 2000, 6.

compagnons que le ciel mouvant et le vent qui court, où pourtant plane une grande douceur[23]'

Such is the climate that Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba would have entered. Mespoulet was a teacher. Herself and Mignon were laureates of the *agrégation*, a highly selective and prestigious competitive exam that qualifies young people to teach. Very few women took this exam in the early years of the 20th century. M. Mespoulet and M. Mignon can therefore be considered to have been members of the French intellectual elite: 'Autour du Monde, 1898, travel scholarships were administered by the Sorbonne to enable young teachers chosen from the intellectual and moral elite of the nation to enter into sympathetic communication with the ideas, feelings and lives of other peoples'[24].

As such we can only assume that Mespoulet's education would have led her to hold certain romantic, and potentially biased, notions within her consciousness regarding Ireland and her people. Catherine Maignant suggests the extreme likelihood of her having read Marie-Anne de Bovet's illustrated travel diary, first published in 1889 and re published in 1908. Grace Neville expands upon this:

> ……from the Middle Ages onwards, Ireland, the Irish and versions of Ireland from the purportedly factual to the frankly fantastic have surfaced in French-language texts….This trickle of writing has swollen into a flood that continues unabated to this very day: from our own century come works as varied as the luminous colour photographs and accompanying text left by two French women photographers visiting Galway and the surrounding area in 1913 and the very different famous (infamous?) 1992 Marie Claire magazine article describing

23 Mespoulet in Maignant, "Re-imagining Ireland through early 20th century French eyes", 155-178.

24 Amad, "Cinema's 'Sanctuary", 141.

> modern Irish women as being still stuck in the Middle Ages, and implying that if only they resembled their French counterparts, they would be happier[25].

Mespoulet's images were first exhibited in Ireland on the initiative of the French Embassy and the Alliance Française, in 1981[26]. In 2007 when the images were exhibited at the Galway City Museum curator Fidelma Mullane highlighted that 'the exhibition must be viewed in the context of developments within the discipline of geography in France'[27]. In the new discipline of human geography the geographer, by observing and analysing the patterns of human activities, could define cultural and geographical areas. Mespoulet reflected these theories by focusing on more traditional settlements to embody a disappearing way of life. As such, Mespoulet would not have photographed the types of revolutionary women previously alluded to.

The women of Mespoulet's archive embody a social and economic history, often neglected in favour of a male dominated political history. At face value there are no revolutionaries here. As Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd write in *Women in Early Modern Ireland*:

> In the post-war years, the Irish historical world became – with a few notable exceptions – overwhelmingly male……Some women were treated more seriously but usually because they had participated in the political world on male terms. The two Irish women who have been the subject of most biographies and historical examination – Grainne O'Malley and Constance Markievicz – are classic examples of this phenomenon[28].

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25 Neville, "Towards an analyses of the writings of J.-J. Prévost".

26 Maignant, "Re-imagining Ireland," 56.

27 Mullane in Siggins, "Peaceful pictures on the eve of war."

28 MacCurtain and O'Dowd, Women in Early Modern Ireland, 2.

Mespoulet's women of the West of Ireland, however, are the anonymous poor working women of Ireland. It is these women that Mespoulet focuses on. For while there are images of the landscape, of monuments, of ruins, of men at work and at rest, the collection focuses on women in a more sustained manner than any other people or place represented. The women she focuses on are women from one particular area, The Claddagh.

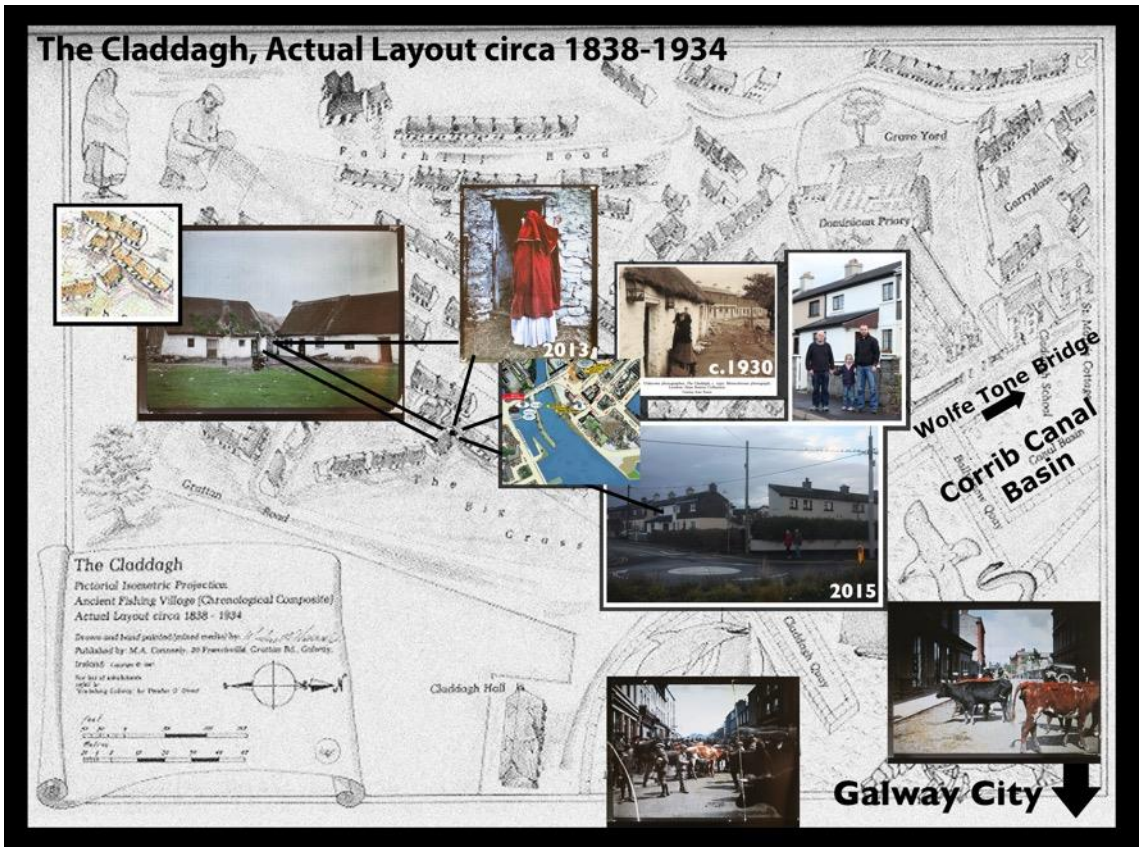


Figure 07: The Claddagh, collage of relevant images and locations. *Ailbhe Greaney.*

The area of the Claddagh was a very particular place, close to an urban centre but physically and metaphorically separated from the city of Galway, by the apparent separateness of its Irish-speaking inhabitants. As Cally Blackman, in *Colouring the Claddagh*, has observed, it was frequently described as a place apart[29]. Tommy Holohan, the grandson of Nan O'Toole, photographed by Mespoulet, and from an old Claddagh

29 Blackman, "Colouring the Claddagh: A Distorted View?", 219.

family, has pointed out in conversation that these would have been private women and the community insular, with marriage taking place only between people of the Claddagh, Connemara and the Aran Islands. The entrance to the Claddagh was at Wolftone Bridge. No entry by unknown persons ever went unnoticed.

> The Claddagh (Irish for'a stony seashore') was an ancient fishing community close to Galway City described as a clachan, an apparently random cluster of single-storey, thatched vernacular dwellings more commonly associated with a rural environment[30].

Catherine Maignant, in her article *Re-imagining Ireland through early 20th century French eyes* gives Mespoulet no credit for overcoming what has been noted as the shyness of the people of the Claddagh, she suggests that the local peoples existing familiarity with travel writers, artists and photographers would have lessened this shyness when encountered by Mespoulet. She regards Mespoulet as condescending in her diary entries, citing the way in which Mespoulet 'cheated the shy women into posing and keeping quiet by telling stories and jokes'[31]. Maignant goes on to write that 'M. Mespoulet did not treat the people she met as her equals. She behaved as a charitable outsider who felt for the natives she had come to examine'[32]. She criticizes the physical descriptions made by Mespoulet in her diary, linking them to the study of Phrenology and its overarching racist determinations; whereby, in general terms, the shape of one's head conforms to the shape of one's mind. Mespoulet is revealed to have categorised the Claddagh women as impatient, in so doing developing subtle hierarchy's between people from different parts

30 Mullane, "Distorted Views of the people and their houses in the Claddagh", 171.

31 Mespoulet in Maignant, "Re-imagining Ireland," 171.

32 Mespoulet in Maignant, "Re-imagining Ireland," 171.

of the country and recording physical distinctions between different racial types:

> She commented on the mat complexion and dark eyes of a woman whom she saw as obviously descended from "Spanish settlers [colons espagnols]" and she contrasted her appearance with that of blond-haired and fair-skinned true Irish Celts. She also compared the features of a long-faced, purple-eyed young man, the very type of "men of the Celtic race [les hommes de la race celte]", with those of men from lower Brittany[33].

In the portrayal of Ireland's people Maignant may be correct in criticizing the photographers' predisposition towards the ruin, and the easy lyrical interpretation of the landscape, based upon the pre-existing research of travel writers; as well as the adoption of a detached, scientific photographic methodology, as influenced by systems of Phrenology. There is a brevity to the collection of Irish photographs and an inconsistency of location and subject which reveals that Mespoulet was not as knowledgeable as she could have been whilst creating an 'Archive' of Ireland. In this respect the work created in Ireland functions as a flawed, incomplete, disparate, record or archive of a place. What stands out however are the representations of women made by women, not adequately defined as coming from different nations, but more meaningfully coming from different states of modernity fractured by separate nationalistic agendas.

- Legende opérateur:

L'ancien costume du Claddagh et trois attitudes traditionnelles.

- Commentaire opérateur:

33 Mespoulet in Maignant, "Re-imagining Ireland," 173.

Nous avons fort heureusement pu nous procurer un unique spécimen de ce très beau costume qui n'est plus porté depuis quelques années déjà. Les femmes l'ont abandonné pour le châle national lourd à franges et ne veulent plus en entendre parler. La jupe claire se portait toujours retroussée sur le jupon rouge comme on pourra le voir encore dans deux des clichés suivants. La jeune fille qui a posé pour ces trois clichés est considérée à Galway comme un des types les plus parfaits de The Irish Colleen.

- Sources:

MESPOULET. The Perfection Reporter's Note Book

- Legende opérateur:

**Three traditional poses in the ancient costume of the Claddagh.**

- Commentaire opérateur:

**We were happily able to procure a unique specimen of this beautiful costume that for several years now is no longer worn. The women abandoned it for the heavy, fringed, national shawl and no longer want to hear talk about it. The light skirt is always worn turned up over the red skirt as one can still see in two of the following slides. The young girl who posed for these three images is considered in Galway to be a perfect example of The Irish Colleen.**

- Sources:

**MESPOULET. The Perfection Reporter's Note Book**[34]

With this perspective in mind, photographs taken by Mespoulet might be read as clear, direct and unequivocally modern. The women look into the camera with a gaze that is unflinching. In the images of Nan O'Toole and Mian Kelly, the red of the cloak adds a

34 Mespoulet, The Perfection Reporter's Note Book, 1913.

performative element to the images and ties in with paintings by William Evans, Paul Henry, John Lavery and Augustus Nicholas, created before and after these photographs were made. The dramatic presence of red in the landscape creates an effect, which seems contrived, potentially artificial and complex. The cloak in the images by Mespoulet belonged to the O'Toole family and was only used on special occasions. It can be read as such, passed from photograph to photograph as it is on this special occasion. Mespoulet, in her text, in fact, suggests that this cloak would have fallen out of fashion by 1913 and therefore was little used, confirming the contrived nature of its presentation in these images. Several images of the women, especially Mian, 'posed' in the cloak direct us to look more closely at the images where the cloak is absent, however. These are the women at work and suggest more powerfully to us the behind-the-scenes narrative of the everyday. Here the 'elusive' muted colours of workaday dress prompt us to a more nuanced reading of their lives. While muted in contrast to the vibrancy of the red, the colour revealed within this dress, absent from black and white photographic renderings, is that of the landscape that surrounds these women.

Figure 08: Nan O'Toole (Right) and Mary Jordan, Powells Gable, the Claddagh, Galway, 26 May 1913. *Marguerite Mespoulet,* Archives de la Planète. Autochrome. Paris: Musée Albert Kahn.
Black and White Prints (reproductions of the original colour autochromes) courtesy the private collection of Tommy Holohan.
Figure 09: Back of print, courtesy the private collection of Tommy Holohan. (*Inscription: 'Mrs Mary Jordan Brown Ring Shawl, Chapel Lane, Claddagh. Mrs Ann O'Toole, House Keepers Shawl, Rope Walk Claddagh').*

The soft greys, browns and blues of the women's clothes speak to the surrounding landscape, in effect to the surrounding landscape of labour.

> There is plenty of scattered evidence to indicate that at certain times and in certain places women were able to play an active role in the life of the maritime community. Some engaged in inshore fishing when men were pressed for naval service; others controlled the marketing and retail of fish brought home by their husbands, as occurred at Claddagh, near Galway, during the eighteenth century and possibly earlier'[35].

As Blackman points out, Blue and not Red was the colour of the cloak that had identified

35 Appleby, Bandits at Sea A Pirates Reader, 284.

a woman of the Claddagh for centuries. It was the country women who came into Galway City from surrounding areas to sell produce who wore the red hooded cloak, sometimes referred to as 'the Galway cloak'. 'The [Claddagh] women still retain their ancient Irish habit consisting of a blue mantle, a red body-gown, a petticoat of the same colour, and a blue or red cotton handkerchief bound round the head after the old fashion'[36].

Whilst working with certain preconceived ideas in relation to the Irish Coleen, Mespoulet creates images that actually banish this term to a romantic, fictionalized past. The inclusion of physical descriptions that point to the descendants of Spanish settlers acknowledges a society that is not so insular, or mono-cultural, as it might first appear. Whilst reference to fair-skinned true Irish Celts may be naïve; and the influence of Spanish settlers more likely to have been located within Galway City and not the closed community of the Claddagh; this dialogue opens up a narrative that negates the idea of a pure authentic race. The images of Mian Kelly, her mother Nan, and fellow Claddagh women, are not idealized. The fabric of their character, of their environment, of their work is in fact a relief from such notions. The image of Nan O'Toole holding up her white skirt to reveal the red underskirt, also reveals her bare feet on hard stones. Within this image, the face of the older woman, in comparison with that of the younger Mian; chin tilted upwards, her mouth expressive; is mute and steadfast.

Mespoulet went on become a founding member of the French Association of University Women; and between 1926–29 she was vice president of the International Federation of University Women. This is not surprising when one looks back to her brief

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36 Hardiman in Blackman "Colouring the Claddagh : A Distorted View?", 222.

Please see this published Taylor and Francis journal article for full colour reproductions of Albert Kahn Autochromes depicting women from the Cladagh in relevant dress.

sojourn as a photographer in the West of Ireland. No doubt photographing for the Albert Kahn Archive served as an adventure for Mespoulet and Mignon. They were not professional photographers and whilst operating with certain romantic ideals as well as particular objectives of the Kahn Archive, they were independent enough to perform under their own auspices. While some of the images from the Claddagh fulfil the objectives of the Kahn Archive, there was no requirement to develop such a series of women, when one or two 'studies,' one or two 'types' might have sufficed. Mespoulet individualised the women of the Claddagh, where previously they had been represented as observed elements within a curious and rare social context. These women have been named and identified, and their legacy and life journey is now possible to trace as part of a public consciousness that acknowledges the individual, social and economic history of such women.: 'The women possess unlimited control over their husbands, the produce of whose labours they exclusively manage, allowing the men more money than suffice to keep their boats in repair'[37].

Figure 10: Michael O'Toole. Print courtesy the private collection of Tommy Holohan.
Figure 11: Back of print, courtesy the private collection of Tommy Holohan. (*Inscription: 'Mike O'Toole Rope Walk Claddagh').*

Rather poignantly, a heart-shaped fragment of a photograph is the only image that

37 Hardiman in O'Dowd, *Down by the Claddagh*, 41.

Mian and Peg, the daughters of Nan and Michael O'Toole, possessed of their father. This photographic fragment, this scrap of worn and re-worn material, from a photograph taken by a now unknown photographer, has become integrated into the fabric of these women's lives. It is part of the Holohan family archive, treasured by Tommy Holohan and Katie Holohan, Great-Great-Grand daughter of Nan O'Toole and Grand-Niece of Mian Kelly. Like the female characters in the plays of John Millington Synge, who made his own photographic images of Galway, Mespoulet's women are 'more clearly defined than most of the men but are also treated with a sympathetic complexity which frequently determines the plot, mood and theme'[38]. Mespoulet's images of women from the Claddagh mark both herself and her subjects as authors in their own right. There is within the work, as Gibbon's has identified in relation to the photographic work of Helen Hooker O'Malley in the 1930s: '..a keen ethnographic eye, in keeping with lived experience at a local level, but also possessing a modernist sensibility, allowing for the critical detachment without which change in the self images of an age cannot take place'[39]. The conflation of fact and fiction within the Albert Kahn images, reveals the reluctance of Mespoulet to neutrally categorize, but rather to collude with the women in the creation of an identity that looked forward as well as backwards. This is borne out in the performative wearing and posing of the red cloak; in the photographer's step backwards so as to allow a stepping forward of the subject. We do not know whether it was the subject or the photographer's idea to perform the wearing of this cloak. Its reservation for special occasion, and the rarity of its use in 1913, however, suggests a collaboration and a communication between subject and photographer. Despite previous suggestions that the

38 Gallagher, Women in Irish legend, life and literature, 58.

39 Gibbons, Ungovernable Eyes, 15.

people of the Claddagh would have been used to this kind of study by an outsider, the set of images of Nan O'Toole and Mian Kelly wearing the little worn red cloak, reveals an understanding of this photographic act as special, as communication that might raise our understanding of such women and their place beyond poverty and repression.

Figure 12: *Thuy Hoan Pham* and Family, Paris, *Street Flower*, 2014. *Ailbhe Greaney*

***Leon Busy in Vietnam.***

At face value there are no revolutionaries archived in the collection of autochromes made by Leon Busy (1874-1950) in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina between 1914 and 1917. The scale of his archive renders the Irish archive a short story to his novel. The use of the term novel here is not to suggest that the images created by Busy were fictions. They were however, like the images of Mespoulet, a particular perspective, shaped by their author as much, as by the agenda of the archive's commissioner. In 1915 at the start of World War I, Vietnam was part of French Indochina. Rebellions against the French colonial power intensified during and after World War I. As with the images of Ireland, however, the archive is defined as much by what is absent as by what is present. The images of Vietnam present a culture untouched by the colonial presence, unaltered by

political strife and conflict. In sending Leon Busy, a French Military officer, to photograph the unindustrialised everyday life of the Vietnamese people we cannot escape the thought expressed by Paula Amad that 'The planetary ambitions of Kahn's Archive were underwritten by French national ideals'[40]. Amad goes further in suggesting that 'the Archives de la Planete' might more correctly be called 'the Archives of the *French Colonial* Planet'[41].

Busy departed for Hanoi on the 12th of July 1914, less than a month before the German invasion of Belgium. This was Busy's fifth posting to Indochina. He volunteered to take pictures for the Archive, writing to Brunhes just a few weeks before. A keen amateur photographer, Busy was awarded first prize by the prestigious Societe Francaise de Photographie. As a sous intendeant-militaire, Busy would not have been involved in any direct aggression; rather his main responsibilities would have resided over logistics and supply. As such he devoted most of his attention to his photographic endeavours. While some French influence in the form of colonial architecture creeps into the archive, there is little that acknowledges a French human or military presence. His focus was on, as David Okefina observes, 'dress, working lives, leisure activities, religious practices, gastronomic conventions and social hierarchies of Vietnam and its people'[42]. This might be interpreted as adhering to the agenda of the archive and its mission to distil daily lives of the Vietnamese people. However, Creed and Hoorn suggest that, as with the Red Cloak in the images of Ireland, there is an element of pretence here. The images 'Point to a time when there was no need to record rituals of daily life because they were still living

40 Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 267.

41 Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 267.

42 Okuefuna, The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn, 231.

traditions'[43].

Widely observed within the archive, is the domination of Busy's lingering look at the women of Vietnam. Busy's technical ability and obvious photographic talents in the representation of these women have garnered him both praise and distain, in equal measure. While the images of Ireland similarly failed to reflect upon colonial influences and aggressions, this did not hold true for the entire archive. In 1913, during the Balkans war, Brunhes himself and Auguste Leon carried cameras into sites of battle. The Archives of the Planet were also present in the French Army camps of the First World War. Not only did they photograph French soldiers and the detrimental consequences of war they also photographed troops from North Africa and Indochina. Absent of such content, it is not hard to see why Amad has described Leon Busy's work as 'some of the most aesthetically stylized and politically muted films in the archive'[44]. His focus on rural stability and upon objectifying the physical characteristics of Vietnamese women reveals an invasive, colonial agenda. Film historians such as Amad note the lack of critical writing on the Albert Kahn Archive. Rarer still are critical accounts from a still photographic perspective. While Amad's critique of Busy's moving images may be transferred to many of the autochromes, the collection is left wanting of a fuller photographic inspection.

Creed and Hoorn, in a similar way to Okefina, focus on a film entitled: *Scène de Déshabillage, Tonkin (1921).* As with all of the films this was produced as an unedited black and white sequence. Such raw glimpses of life embody the Archive's Film collection. They very often focus on everyday activities and are uninterrupted scenes,

43 Creed and Hoorn, "Memory and History", 233.

44 Amad in Okuefuna, The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn, 232.

representing an immediate social situation. In this instance the situation is a young Vietnamese woman undressing and dressing before the camera. The film is deliberately shot out of focus. In my opinion, this confuses the context of the piece to a certain extent. Where Amad compares it to an Eadweard Muybridge study of the human body in movement, it is impossible to read this film in such terms due to its out of focus structure. Clearly Busy filmed the scene in this way to prevent a pornographic reading. To a post-modern eye however, it seems to have exactly the opposite effect. When viewed in the context of the volume of lush photographic depictions of women within the archive, it is difficult not to read it as some kind of appreciation or homage to the female form rather than a scientific study of it. The out of focus haze, veils the image, increasing the level of intimacy and generating the sense of a forbidden view.

It is the woman herself, however, that draws this film back from the brink. Unlike Hollywood films, where voyeurism is hidden by the actor's refusal to acknowledge the camera, the subjects in these early films, more often than not look into the camera, addressing both the filmmaker and the viewer. Within *Scène de Déshabillage, Tonkin*, the subject, the woman, returns the gaze and as such asserts herself as present. Another female subject does this, whilst also disrobing, within a separate series of black and white photographs from the archive. By returning the gaze, she is in this way identifying herself as author. The direct gaze and upright, proud posture is evident within the black and white film as well as within some of the colour autochrome portraits held within the archive; the series of black and white photographs presents a subtly different stance, however. None of these films or images exist within the public domain and can only be viewed on site at the Albert Kahn Archive.

Like Mespoulet, Busy would have produced his images with certain romantic notions regarding Vietnam as a place and its people. In the 19th Century French artistic

influences began to take hold in Vietnam. As such Busy is victim to the same kind of romantic lure put forward by painters and writers of the time. It is these kinds of romantic depictions, which dominate the archive, and which dominate the dialogue regarding the archive. Co-inciding with Leon Busy's time in Vietnam, the Ecole Superieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine was founded. This was a place for Vietnamese artists to learn European methods and to develop their own styles inspired by French aesthetics applied to Vietnamese subjects. With this in mind, and upon closer inspection, there is potentially a softer interpretation of Busy's work than might have originally been suggested. In his essay *Boulogne-Billancourt/Delft* Sam Rohdie likens Busy's work to that of Vermeer. He concludes rather ambiguously that 'Women are the subjects of many of his autochromes. One of these exactly recalls Vermeer's Portrait of a Young Girl (1665-6)'[45]. Earlier in the text he writes of the love and attachment that Busy felt for the people of Vietnam. Rather than being a geographical record of a monument or a typical habitation, they exist as a pleasing, expressive and personal statement. 'There is a halo to his photographs of love, nostalgia, timelessness and sensuous beauty'[46]. Despite this suggestion, Busy's rendering of these romantic perspectives is substantially more loaded than Mespoulet's. As a white French man, photographing an Asian, colonised woman, the terms are highly contentious. Certainly, with regard to Mespoulet, as a white, educated woman, coming from an elite stratum of society, the terms of engagement were similarly neither fair nor equal. Without the sensual, lingering quality of Busy's gaze however, it is possible for photographer and subject to find equality and for Mespoulet's images to allow the subject to more fully represent herself. It is the overt sensuality within Busy's

45 Rohdie, *Promised Lands*, 70.

46 Rohdie, *Promised Lands*, 64.

images, the repetition of his gaze over these women, which makes the images problematic.

The black and white photographic series referenced above, of a woman disrobing; critically unexamined in the same way as the film work; make clear the uneasy set of relationships that exist between author and subject, or possibly author and object. Unnamed as this woman is, listed only as Jeune Femme, it is hard to ascertain whether she is the same woman as the Jeune Fille from *Scène de Déshabillage, Tonkin*. The vulnerability exhibited within the black and white still photographs reveals a different set of relationships than that of the film, however. There is a palpable sense of naiveté and vulnerability within these images. They are a presentation of more than the particulars of the young woman's garments, which is the framework within which the images are set. She is pictured taking off a layer of clothing within each image. Standing on the same spot - within the corner of what appears to be a ruined building - she begins, smiling at the camera, to remove her hat; by holding the string with both hands under her chin. When we reach the sixth image, she has removed her loose-fitting coat, simple white vest and dismantled her hair; delicately unravelling the coil from around her head and removing gently the long piece of ribbon holding it in place. In the final image we see the young woman standing, with only her full-length dark skirt remaining - her corresponding long dark hair hangs over her bare right shoulder and chest – and she smiles submissively at the camera, whilst holding onto the ties of her skirt with both hands. The still photographs of this women are in focus, where the film is not. Her skirt remains, where the young girl in the film is fully disrobed. Her hair is uncoiled, with her counterpart's coil left intact. The most significant point of departure within the photographic series lies within the 'Young Woman's' stance. She appears half-finished, nervously holding the strings of her skirt, her hair undone; where the 'Young Girl' of the film stands bolt upright, arms

straight by her side, facing the camera uncompromisingly, disrobed but not undone. Through the guise of the 'Young Woman's' garments, the photographer is really looking at what lies underneath, in a way that feels invasive through its actual lack of transparency. Unnamed as she is, she is not portrayed in these images. In fact, it is the photographer's lack of transparency in his objectives, which renders the woman transparent. We look through her and she stands not as an individual but as a malleable form, to be created, transformed and potentially destroyed by the viewer.

Figure 13: Installation image *"Hanoï en Couleurs (1914-1917)"* Cité Internationale Universitaire De Paris. *Ailbhe Greaney.*

More disappointing than this kind of gaze however, is the fact that the overt character of such a women is lost within such a view. If one looks hard enough within

Leon Busy's narrative it is possible to find images where the women succeed in representing themselves. There are women present who stand bolt upright and challenge the photographer, they defy him to present anything other than their own idea of self. The way in which these women represent themselves is comparable to that of the women of the Claddagh. Despite Busy's misguided perspective and inappropriate focus on aesthetics and femininity, these women manage to assert themselves beyond Busy's gaze. A quiet strength exerts itself here, which defies the male colonizer to define her. As Paul Strand wrote in relation to the photographs of David Octavius Hill, in the eighteen-hundreds, it is possible for this kind of inner strength to have an aesthetic counterpart in the solidity of aesthetic structure[47]. Very few of these direct, upright women, with their unflinching gaze, have been selected for exhibition or publication within the public domain.

Yet, these are the images that tell us something about the future.

These are the women that represent the social, economic and revolutionary history of Vietnam. These women are the forebears of the "long haired warriors".

For indeed Ireland is not alone within its history of female revolutionaries. The foundation of Vietnam is tied inextricably linked to the Trung sisters. Trung Trac and Trung Nhi headed a rebellion against the Chinese Han Dynasty overlords and briefly established an autonomous state. This was the first Vietnamese independence movement and the strong leadership of the sisters, as the Encyclopaedia Britannica tells us 'is cited by scholars of Southeast Asian culture as testimony to the respected position and freedom

47 Strand in Gibbons, *Ungovernable Eyes,* 16.

of women in Vietnamese society, as compared with the male-dominated societies of China and India'[48]. Although men were the vast majority of the combatants in the country's many wars, there were women warriors in Vietnam during nearly a half-century of conflict, and the tradition dated from the beginning of the country's history as illustrated by the Trung sisters. Nguyen Thi Dinh became the highest-ranking female member of the National Liberation Front's armed forces, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). She commanded and inspired women throughout the South to join the fight against outside occupation. She was awarded the appellation "long-haired warrior" after the successful uprisings, the dong khoi, in Ben Tre Province in January 1960. The title was later applied to all the women of the southern resistance by ho Chi Minh himself[49].

Such a title, and the images associated with it, glamorize the efforts of the women to some degree and, as with Busy's narrative, reduce the dialogue to one that centres on the body as dependent upon appearance and aesthetics. Here the appearance and aesthetics of war as propaganda dominate, while, as in Irish society, the social and economic histories of women remain invisible. While male causalities of war were higher than women, the women suffered on the ground during, and for many years after, the war. In Ireland, and indeed in countries such as Spain and Greece, also ravaged by civil war, the forcible *cutting* of women's hair was a widespread practice[50]. In Ireland this was carried out by forces on both sides of the conflict, the Crown Forces and the IRA. Linda Connelly in her essay, *How forced hair cutting was used as a weapon of war in Ireland*,

48 Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Trung Sisters Vietnamese Rebel Sisters."

49 Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*.

50 Connolly, "How forced hair cutting was used as a weapon of war in Ireland."

draws our attention to a braid of brown hair, displayed at the National Museum as part of *The Irish Wars 1919-1923* exhibition. It is 'said to have been cut from a woman in a "punishment shearing" or "bobbling" by a member of the IRA'[51]; although this account was later disputed by Michael Barry, when found in his possession in 1920. There are numerous published accounts however of women subjected to brutal sheering, clipping and cutting during this conflict; including a public court case in Galway in 1920, bearing witness to the cutting of a young Tuam woman's hair with shears. The term 'long haired warriors', as applied to Vietnamese combatants, in its identification of aesthetic physical female form, highlights the inherent threat posed by a woman's hair, which she can conceal or reveal at will, until such time as she cannot. Today the lush green of Vietnamese rice paddies also belie the continuing destruction caused by war. Chemicals retained in the soil in the decades following the cessation of the Vietnam War in 1975, mean that women of the Ben Tre Delta, south of Saigon, experienced a high rate of stillbirths and bore many deformed children. Despite the lure of capitalism, which has opened up a dialogue between Vietnam and the west, despite positive statistics in terms of political representation - and a climate within which 'Vietnam's Communist Party has long presented itself as an advocate for female equality, with its first party document in the early 1930s proclaiming it as a key policy objective'[52] - a communist translator for any official narrative must still translate the voice of the female peasant warrior. Tensions still exist between policy, rhetoric and traditional ways of life. In the household, where the Vietnamese woman has been traditionally placed due to the historic adoption of male

51 Connolly, "How forced hair cutting was used as a weapon of war in Ireland."

52 Abjorensen, "Two Faces of Gender Equity In Vietnam."

orientated Chinese confusion traditions, the battle is played out between modernisation and social cohesion. The narrative of the collective still holds sway and the individual voice of the woman whilst no longer silent, is quiet, particularly in poorer communities. It is disappointing therefore that the narrative around the Vietnamese women of the Albert Kahn Archive should centre upon the aesthetic, physical characteristics of their body. It certainly seems that most edits of the work play to this, presenting the demure, seductive presentations rather than the more confrontational, direct portraits. My perception of the work, after seeing the exhibition *Hanoï en Coulers* in Paris in 2014, was altered following my study of the entire Archive at the Musee Albert Kahn in Boulogne. The wealth is staggering, some fifteen hundred images. As the images unfold, one upon the other, the voices of the women begin to overtake the voice of the photographer and it is she, like the women of the Claddagh, who in fact asserts herself as author. These are the images that I want to see, but which have not previously been selected to enter the conversation.

***Street Flower: Methods and Processes***

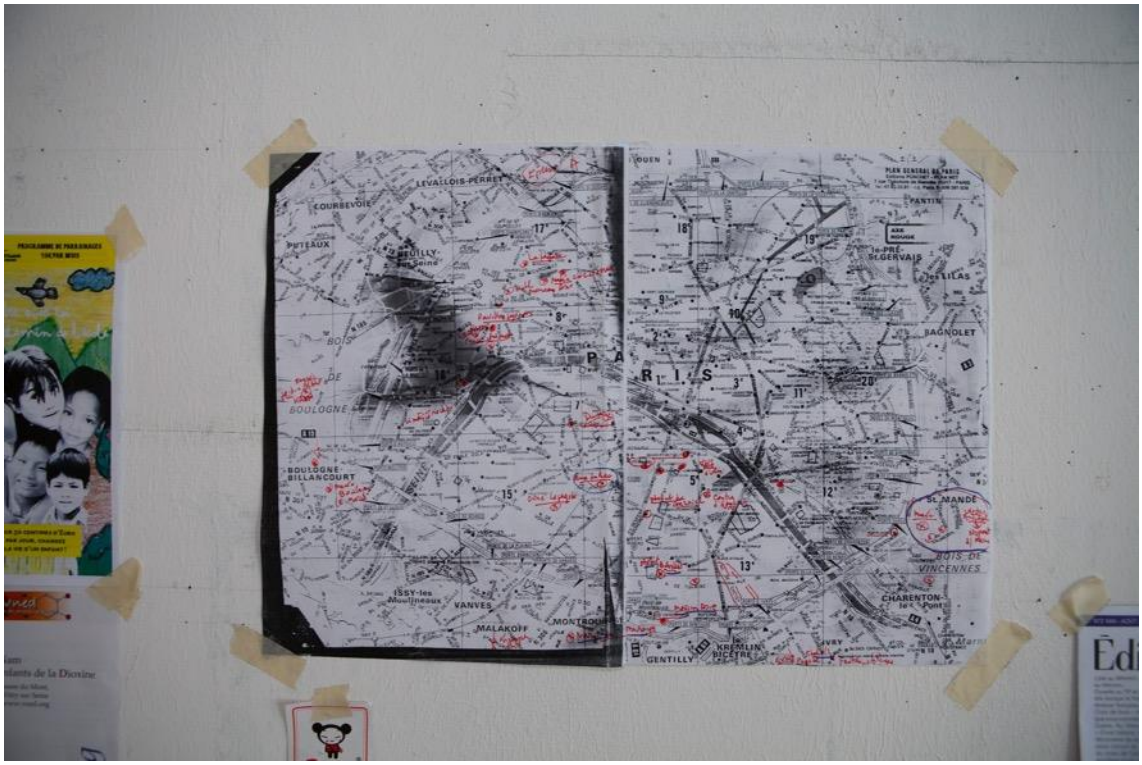


Figure 14: Map of Paris and sites of Vietnamese importance, used as locations for *Street Flower*. Generously provided by Lê Pham Trong.

Overall, the patriarchal attitudes reflected in the depiction and representation of Vietnamese women within, and edited from, the Albert Kahn Archive is at odds with the representation of Irish women from the Albert Kahn Archive. As such it is difficult to individualise the Vietnamese women or to recognize the strength of their rebellious character. The viewer, the researcher, has to work hard to obtain a view of the roles that these women would come to hold while their country was at war. A more collaborative way of working, as represented by Mespoulet and Mignon-Alba in Ireland, was pursued within my own photographic practice and the body of work entitled *Street Flower*. While the photographing of this work began during a residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais Paris in 2014, the work was conceived while on a personal trip to Vietnam in 2013. Already working on a commission, *The Light Beautiful*, which reflected on the birth and

death of Oscar Wilde in Dublin and Paris - as well as his paper *The House Beautiful* - this research; combined with an exploration of the novel *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong; brought together in my mind Vietnam and Ireland's relationship to culture and revolution, colonisation and migration, location and dislocation. *The Book of Salt* centres around the life of Gertrude Stein's Vietnamese Chef Binh, in Paris. The complex story of Binh's life is translated via key photographs, which Binh uses to convey the ambiguity inherent within all narratives, written or visual. In *The Book of Salt* the image and the word are treated like a material, which, like the mineral Salt, can be interpreted as different things depending upon its origin, 'food, sweat, tears and the sea'[53].

In *Street Flower* the young women wear jackets within Parisian landscapes that they previously wore moving through the streets of Vietnam by moped. In Vietnam the jackets are worn to protect the skin from the sun. The jackets are multi-coloured, with floral patterns. They are not traditional, nor do they reference the past. Rather, they are a part of contemporary culture, referencing a momentum that is forward facing. Moving en masse through the streets of Hanoï and Saigon, women wearing these jackets, appear like a moving garden. The displacement of the Vietnamese jackets re-locates aspects of Vietnamese sun, style and subtlety of substance, within a Parisian landscape. Being physically resident in Paris during my residency made access to Vietnamese communities possible, where previous email and telephone correspondence had failed. I was still entering a community from the outside, however, and it took time before, during and after the residency to build significant relationships with this community. While in Paris I spent a large amount of time traveling through the city on foot and by metro, visiting associations such as Centre Culturel Vietnamien, Union des Jeunes Vietnamiens de

53 Truong, "Interview with Monique Truong".

France, Foyer Vietnam Paris, Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, Unesco, The Musée Cernuschi, as well as Vietnamese restaurants and Asian community centres. There is a diverse range of experience to represent here, from the French/Vietnamese intelligencia who departed Vietnam in the 1950's to the more impoverished boat people who departed in the 1970's. My research grew also to encompass archival research, including the Archives of CIRAD (photographic & environmental), located within The Jardin Tropical de Paris (1899 test garden for tropical plants from French Colonies/1907 Colonial Exhibition/WWI Hospital for French Colonial Troops) as well as The Albert Kahn "Archives of the Planet," museum and gardens at Boulogne-Billancourt. Research for *Street Flower* centered around first/second generation migrants to France following the Geneva Accords, first/second generation migrants following the fall of Saigon (incl. Boat People), as well as the current generation of young Vietnamese migrants.

*Street Flower* focuses predominantly on this young generation of Vietnamese women traveling to Paris to live now, as well as the daughters of women who travelled by boat to Europe in the 1970's. Picturing Vietnamese women in contemporary Paris, using techniques that are both collaborative and performative in nature, is an attempt to understand our ability to both transform and be transformed by place. Vietnamese women have historically remained silent about their journeys[54], there has been little visual or written material published in relation to their histories. As such they have remained invisible, potentially subject to only blunt or inaccurate translation. Many factors have contributed to this, including, as referenced at the start of this paper, the sublimation of individual identity, and in particular female identity, within a society that favours the collective. The photographic portraits within *Street Flower*, seek to indivualise and

54 Nguyen, Memory Is Another Country.

internalize, within a body of work that is a collective and which draws inspiration from the women moving en masse through the city streets of Vietnam. The jackets used in the photographs were purchased in the markets of Vietnam. The young women in Hanoï and Saigon led me to the stalls where jackets of every colour and pattern were piled high to tipping point. These are the jackets that I brought with me to Paris and which the young Vietnamese migrants recognized instantly. The images created with these jackets draw on oral and written stories, as well as the subject's relationship to the places within which they inhabit. Photographic locations within Paris, selected by the women, include private homes and gardens, botanic/tropical gardens, plus additional sites of cultural/social/political significance for the Vietnamese community in Paris. The images question whether historical crisis can help us to navigate both the contemporary crisis and potential of migration?

> 'And we are still too high above the clouds to see them now as they float, like birds on the water'[55]

55 Morris-Suzuki in Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 13.

Figure 15: Violette Ton-That, Paris, *Street Flower*, 2015. *Ailbhe Greaney.*

Some of the subjects photographed for *Street Flower* are expatriates by choice, some by necessity. To leave a place of one's free will, however, does not always presume a singularity of heart and mind. It is this in between place - which exists in the mind - that is explored; one where loss, hope, memory and imagination create a potency of feeling towards the place in which they do, and yet do not, live. Here, lives are predicated on the hope of one day coming home, or on the fear of one day being forced home. Sometimes the wish and the fear are the same. And, sometimes, this plus time turns potency to abjectness, where the actual reality of a home once hoped for becomes something feared for its potential strangeness. As Edward Said suggests:

> 'The exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and

half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or secret outcast on another. Every scene or situation in the new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country'[56].

How do we reconcile ourselves with place so as to understand that which is unfamiliar? Here the environment is malleable, a hybrid of two or many more worlds. As Jacob Bronowski is quoted in *Land and Environmental Art*, Man 'In body and mind he is the explorer of nature, the ubiquitous animal who did not find but has made his home in every continent'[57]. These ideas are held within the images made in Paris between the summer of 2014 and the summer of 2015. While the choice of jacket, the choice of location, are used to tell us something about the subject, it is the pose, the incomplete gesture and the body language of the women which reflect the time spent in collaboration and in motion together throughout the city.

The role of the Garden and the Botanic Garden in the expansion of nations and the relocation and transformation of place was used as a starting point within this work, 'Botanic gardens have contributed significantly to the colonial expansion of the west through active participation in the transfer of protected plants and their scientific development as plantation crops for the tropical colonies of the mother country'[58]. However, the contemporary transformation of the post-colonial landscape by the young people who use it, became the key source of inspiration by which to visualize the ways in which Paris France has been transformed by young Vietnamese women. Here the transformed become the transformers. As with the women in the Albert Kahn Archive,

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56 Said, Reflections on Exile And Other Literary And Cultural Essays, 370-371.

57 Bronowski in Kastner and Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art*, 11.

58 Brockway, "Science and Colonial Expansion : The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens," 449.

the images move between the subject as author and authored. The body, as directed by each subject, becomes a part of this new place; colour and dress become a language, and the photographs a kind of fabric, which transport and re-imagine complex personal identities. The methods used here purposefully conceal and reveal the women. Their own natural movement within the frame represents their control over their own body, their choice to reveal or conceal themselves within the landscape of their new Parisian home. Two perspectives are offered, firstly the curiosity of a subjective western observer and secondly the co-creative view of the Vietnamese women's collective.

> ….Kahn's gardens on his properties in Boulogne and Cap Martin…..Both gardens skillfully edit the views and spaces of Oriental, Mediterranean and European landscapes into an ideal voyage through cultural difference, suturing together what in many ways the unedited films leave unfinished[59].

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, my own name Ailbhe – Greaney – Ailbhe - Daughter of Grainne - reveals a clue to my own rebellious ancestry and a clue also to the difficulty inherent in any photographic representation of the women discussed here. In *Toruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghrainne* (The pursuit of Diarmaid and Grainne) the theme is, as Dr. Myles Dillon has said, 'the tragedy of a young girl bethrothed to an old man (Finn) and of the conflict between passion and duty on the part of her lover (Diarmaid). In …. (this) case death is the price of love'[60]. In one version of the story, following Grainne's elopement with Diarmaid, her younger sister Ailbhe is wooed and won by Finn. And so, my own name,

59 Amad, "Cinema's Sanctuary", 142.

60 Dillon in Ni Sheaghdha, Toruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghrainne.

reflects some of the dualities inherent within the narrative of women's history. On the one hand we have the rebellion of Grainne and on the other, we have what might be interpreted as the submission of Ailbhe to convention and authority.

The women presented within *Street Flower*, as with the Irish and Vietnamese women presented within Albert Kahn Archive, come from states whose relationship to women is contradictory and in flux. The states of these young women in Paris are similarly in flux, and the images use colour, dress, fabric, place, movement and unfinished, incomplete gesture to *suggest* identities that are incomplete and as such, seek to tell us something about the unknown, something about the future. The narratives held within subsequent bodies of work, *Wild Flowers* and *Wall Flower*, as part of the larger series *The Arrangement,* continue such a narrative, within the landscape and context of Ireland and the United Kingdom. This series seeks to reflect on the movement of women within three specific, yet evolving, states - France, Ireland and the United Kingdom. The women offer us a purposefully occluded view onto the act and experience of living between 'States', in an age of unprecedented, revolutionary connectivity and communication.

'In Ireland, where the tide of life is rising, we turn not to picture-making, but to the imagination of personality – to drama, gesture'[61].

61 Yeats, *Explorations*,163.

Figure 16: Thanh-Vân Ton-That, Paris, St*reet Flower*, 2014. *Ailbhe Greaney*.

Figure 17: Irish *Wild Flowers*, 2017. *Ailbhe Greaney*.

Figure 18: Preetpal Kaur Rai, Gravesend, ***Wall Flower***, 2020. *Ailbhe Greaney*.